Dalit Aesthetics-An Alternative Way of Looking into Literature

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‘The margins of the nation displace the center; the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis’. (Homi Bhabha. 1990:6)

Among the literary reviewers and critics of literature, it has always been a controversial question to fix ‘What constitutes the literariness of a work of literature?’ In its response, many scholars have tried to formulate various theories since the birth of literature till now. Their theories incorporate various rules, in other words literary aesthetics, which are a pre-requisite for every standard work of art and literature. In the Indian context, the classical rules of literature are found in Bharatmuni’s Natyasastra, an ancient Sanskrit text on dramaturgy, and other Brahmanic books written in Sanskrit. Since most of the books written on the above formula are religious, they can’t represent the whole of the Indian society because it is divided into Vernas which are; Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. This classification is based on the following maxim of Purusukta of Rig-Veda which describes:

_Brahmnoasaya mukhamasit_

_Bahu rajanayah kruta_

_Uru Thdasay Yadvaishya_

_Padabhayam Sudra ajayat_
According to this hymn, Brahmans were born from the mouth of Primal Being, Kshatriyas from His arms, Vaisayas from His thighs and Shudras from His feet. After their birth each one was bound to some certain activities viz Karma to maintain the rhythm of the society. If anybody failed in holding the Varna specific Karma, his Varna would automatically change according to his Karma. Thus, in its starting, these rules were flexible and based on the Karma theory of the people, but in the post Vedic Ages and after that, when Brahmins saw that to be a Brahmin is fruitful but to hold the karma of a Brahmin is very difficult, they very cleverly replaced Karma theory by birth theory. In this way, Brahmins have institutionalized their superiority for the sake of their own benefit and everything that did not fit in their rules, were castrated. Thereafter, they formulated the criterion of standard in each and everything including religion, culture, art and literature. They, instead of devaluing non-Brahmanic things directly, have taken the support of religion.

Most of the Brahmanic texts begin with the depiction of Dharma (religion) and end with Moksha (salvation). They have given space to the stories of the kings, queens, princes, princesses and above all to the priests. But, according to holy Hindu scriptures, Sudras are not entitled either to religious practices or to salvation and their place is mostly deleted from these religious books and if sometimes they are presented, they are presented either with demonic other or exotic. Thus, in this rigid birth based Verna system, Brahmins have become self-made superiors and Sudras are declared inferior to others. They have been deprived of many basic amenities of life, not to talk of art and literature. In Manusmiriti, a Hindu book of social norms for almost 2000 years, it is written that:

1. God said that the duty of a Shudra is to serve the upper varnas faithfully with devotion and without grumbling because, by serving a Brahmin, he will be entitled to get his place in heaven. (Manu I-91)

2. A Shudra is unfit to receive education. The upper varnas should not impart education or give advice to a Shudra. (Manu IV-78 to 80).

3. Brahmins will give Shudras leftover foods, old torn clothes, spoiled grain and old utensils (Manu X-125)

4. A Shudra, who insults a twice born man with gross invectives, shall have his tongue cut out; for he is of low origin. (Manu VIII. 270)
5. If a Shudra arrogantly presumes to preach religion to Brahmins, the king shall have poured burning oil in his mouth and ears. (Manu VIII. 272)

This raises the question—if Sudras are not entitled to the religion, its practices, salvation, various mainstream rituals, festivals and traditions, how then, can they be fit for those Brahmanic literary rules, which constitute the literariness of literature? Hence they rejected the mainstream Indian literary tradition, the stories of kings, queens and priests, and the glorification of their lives in favour of a more humanitarian cause that is to raise the voice of a marginalized class known as Dalit or Untouchable. Getting impetus from Afro-American and Feminist literature, they have formulated their own literature and literary rules known as Dalit literature and Dalit Aesthetics respectively. This research paper is an endeavor to seek this alternative way of looking into a literature, popularly known as the Dalit literature and its aesthetics which is equally important and relevant.

Dalit etymologically means “oppressed” or “broken” and is generally used to refer to people who were once known as “untouchables. These are the people who have been exploited since centuries in the name of caste, class, society, religion etc. According to the 2011 census, there are some 167 million Dalits (referred to in the census as “Scheduled Castes”) in India alone. The best definition in the contemporary uses has been given by Gangadhar Pantwane, a professor of Marathi, who says,

“To me, Dalit is not a caste. He is the man exploited by the social and economic tradition of this country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, teachings of holy books, separatism, fate and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.”

Dalit literature is the literature of these oppressed people. It incorporates many qualities which distinguish it from mainstream literature. It has a fiery strength, an authenticity, a sense of social mission and expressive vibrancy. It is a literature that calls for a change in the attitude of society towards certain basic issues concerning individual relationship, social organization and caste based discrimination. Its message is clear and resounding. Its quality of literary expression is also of a high order. Arjun Dangle, the editor of Poisoned Bread, a collection of Dalit writing says,
“Dalit literature is not simply a literature but it is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and a new people”

In the making of Dalit literature, Dalit writers have used their own theories of formulating literature. Dr C. B. Bharti claims,

“The aim of Dalit literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of live.” (The Aesthetics of Dalit literature)

Then in response to the question ‘What is Dalit aesthetics?’ Sharankumar Limbale says’

“The aesthetics of Dalit literature rest on three things: first, the artist’s social commitment; second, the life-affirming values present in the artistic creation; and third, the ability to raise the readers’ consciousness of fundamental values of life like equality, freedom, justice, and fraternity.” (Towards An Aesthetics of Dalit Literature)

There are two very broad classifications of literature: It should either be for life’s sake or for art’s sake. Art for life’s sake is followed by most of the Indian writers but ironically the life of a Dalit does not come in this category. A just representation of pain and suffering of the Dalits has never been the subject matter of Upper Caste Hindus. They have presented the mythical stories of various kings and queens, love stories of various princes and princesses, dilemma of the separation of a lover and beloved, the wrath of various deities and totally ignored the pathetic lives of Dalits, and in this way they have achieved what is left by the religion; the total negation of Dalits from the literature. They have made the rules for Satyam, Shivam and Sundram of literature which interpellated their own ideology and made the Dalits slave.

Dalit writes believe that their literature should be analyzed from a sociological perspective focused on social values than on beauty. They have rejected mainstream formula of literary measurement and made their own rules of ‘Saltyam Shivam and Sundram’. In the words of Sharankumar Limbale:
Human beings are first and foremost human-this is the Satyam.

The liberation of human beings is Shivam.

The humanity of human beings is Sundram. (Towards An Aesthetic of Dalit Literature)

Dalit society came to understand this ideological exploitation through the thoughts of Babasaheb Ambedkar. This mute society found its hero in Babasaheb and its anguish voice through him who argued the case of untouchables from the boundary of villages to the Round Table conferences held by the British Empire. He fought powerful forces, ranging from upper caste Hindu gatekeepers to God, for their rights. The entire Dalit society felt the impact of Babasaheb’s works. Dalit writers, too, are inspired by powerful writings of Babasaheb and seek their tradition in the writings and deeds of Joytiba Fule, Kabir Das, Sant Tukaram, Sant Raidas and above all Lord Buddha. Thus a new rebel tradition is born out of the rejection of various traditional Brahmanic concepts.

Dalit literature is the outcome of sufferings, oppressions and exploitations of a group of people for centuries. It is not the pain of a single person, nor is it a matter of one day—it is the painful voice of lacks of people, experienced over thousands of years. The anguish of Dalit literature is not that of an individual but of an entire outcaste society. This pain and suffering can never be truly represented by a non-Dalit writer. What is the dilemma of Dalits can never be felt and expressed accurately by non Dalit writers. Therefore, they have rejected the portrayal of Dalits by the non-Dalit writers as unauthentic and incredible.

Dalit literature does not base on the imaginative power of the writer. Instead, it is based on the oppressions, sufferings, discrimination which one encounters throughout one’s life. It has a realistic approach for human beings. It can be written by one who is Dalit by birth. It is filled with rebellion and rejection which gives expression to Dalit consciousness. It is not possible for a non-Dalit writer to convey the caste-specific experiences of Dalits. How can a non-Dalit writer write about the experiences which one faces during the removing and cutting of the dead animals? The inhuman behavior of the upper caste people during and after any festivals of religious ceremonies would never be felt by anyone else but a Dalit. These discriminatory feelings can never be conveyed through imagination but experience which gets its outlet into Dalit literature.
The view of life conveyed in Dalit literature is different from the world of experience expressed hitherto. A new world, a new society and a new human being have been revealed in the literature for the first time and so is the new language. It is the uncouth- impolite language of Dalits of the day-today life. This language does neither have propriety, formality and systematicity nor recognize cultivated gesture and grammar. It is said that language changes after every twenty miles but here it changes within the boundaries of a village. There is one language for one locality and another for another locality. Dalit writers have used these local languages in their literature and by this they have tried to represent the society as accurately as possible. Many critics have opposed the use of this language because they thought it improper for a cultured society but Dalit writers have rejected the validation of standard language because, to the Dalits, the language of the locality seems more familiar than any standard language. In fact, standard language does not have all the words of Dalit lexicon and it fails to present the true account of their exploitation before the society.

The traditional concept of a hero does not suit Dalit literature. It presents a common man as his hero and his odyssey for the sake of a more equalitarian society. It presents the most injurious exploitation of an individual because of his birth which they (proponents of the traditional literature) think, is the sin of the previous birth. The general concept of love is also challenged here because the love of a girl or boy vanishes on knowing the caste of the opposite sex who happens to be a Dalit. Concepts like Catharsis, Peripetia and Anagnorasis of Aristotle do not suit this literature. It hardly makes any Catharsis because the reader becomes more restless after reading it. There is no reversal of fate because there is no inordinate pride in this literature. There is no discovery because the hero is present throughout the work with same identity.

If traditional aesthetics talks about the pleasure and beauty which is imparted by mainstream works of art and literature, Dalit aesthetics talks about the pain and sufferings of a big group of Indian population. This revolutionary aesthetics is based on the ideas of equality, liberty, justice and solidarity. Dalit writers do not believed in the traditional imaginary concept of beauty because, in every age and culture, the concept of beauty is linked to the prevailing ideas. Once, for example, kings and emperors used to be the subjects of literature but now, common man have become the centre of literature and Dalit literature, very vigorously, has addressed their problems. The standard of a work of literature depends on how much and in
what way, an artist’s ideas-embedded in the work-affect the reader. Dalit writers give priority to the problems of society; they do not create literature for achieving popularity, status, and wealth. Their effort is to make the people aware of freedom, justice, love, equality and fraternity. This implies that social values are at least as important for them as so called aesthetic values of beauty and pleasure.

It is appropriate to expect pleasure and beauty from a piece of literature but not at the cost of humanity. Upper caste critics have opposed the need of a separate Dalit aesthetics and wished that it should be critiqued on the basis of eternal values which seem impossible because Dalit literature has different objectives which are more humanitarian and based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. Hence, Dalit literature should be evaluated in the context of its uniqueness, its universal inspiratory values with the help of a separate literary aesthetics which, in true sense, is based on the art for life’s sake.
References


